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Honest Sex Education Advocacy

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HONEST SEX EDUCATION ADVOCACY
Honors Student: Kyleigh Richard, Biological Sciences
Sponsor: Prof. Louis Fosu, Political Science

The inspiration for this project came from a course I took in the spring of 2019 taught by Professor Louis Fosu called *Advocacy and Civil Engagement for a More Equitable Society*. In the class, a group of students including myself began to build an advocacy campaign for honest sex education in public schools in the state of Rhode Island. When the class ended, I had a strong desire to further the campaign and put the knowledge I had learned about actively advocating in real world settings, something we had not had the chance to accomplish fully in class.

I began by analyzing the curriculums of public schools across Rhode Island. I found three major weak points across many of the curriculums: (1) human anatomy is rarely reviewed at the high school level; (2) schools are not providing enough class time each year for sex education; and (3) contraception is not taught until later years when children are most likely already experimenting with sex.

With passion, I commenced my project and created many resources to be used by both educator and student. I also built my own website where I have posted all the documents, please see: <https://kyleighrichard.wixsite.com/honestsexed>. The resources I posted to my website include: (1) PowerPoint that reviews human anatomy; (2) PowerPoint with detailed information about safe methods of contraception for girls; (3) PDF curriculum guide discussing when all aspects of sex education should be taught to high school student, including abortion and sexual violence; and (4) flyer summarizing necessary birth control, which I displayed on my poster.

I chose to put this resource on the poster because methods of contraception became my biggest focal point in my project. After meeting with a sex-education teacher from South Kingstown High School, I learned that misconceptions and lack of education about contraception can be the biggest detriment to our young people. I wanted to create a guide that teachers could hand out to their students debunking many misconceptions, and where young girls would be empowered to discover the safest and most effective form of birth control for themselves. They would also see why they should or shouldn't take certain forms of contraceptives. For example, one of the major reasons a young girl should avoid taking a hormonal birth control pill is if she has a family history of breast or cervical cancer or if she is taking mood stabilizers for depression or mental health. Personally, coming into this project I had no idea that this was a factor of choosing the right form of birth control. Furthermore, if a young girl chooses to have a foreign object such as an IUD or other implantation, she must know how to check it and how often it should be checked as well as all of the risks. On my website, I have compiled a large amount of research that educators can refer to in order to find the sources of my information. My goal was

for them to understand why certain methods of contraception should or should not be recommended, for example, LARCs (Long Acting Contraceptives) should be avoided by developing girls experiencing puberty or girls still not fully matured. Health reasons are detailed in the documents presented. I also created an easy to explain, age-friendly, PowerPoint on contraception for teachers to present in class. I hope that they will use all of these resources together so that there is a strong continuity of information being relayed to students throughout their high school education.

When I began this project, I had planned to end the semester by presenting my findings and resources I created to the Governor's office, Congressional offices, as well as student groups on campus. Due to the COVID-19 virus crisis, these plans were canceled. I had also been set to meet with a social media expert who would help build my website and establish a social media platform. However, I will still email my work to RI policymakers in Congress and the Governor's office in Providence. I will also email a copy of my work to the Women's Program at URI.

Despite these difficulties, I believe I adapted very well and continued to work with Professor Fosu on strengthening my advocacy campaign. We held video conferences where we discussed the issue of implicit bias, and how the issues I was examining would apply to black women in different ways. For example, Black women have the highest deaths from breast cancer and also poor access to healthcare providers; yet, they are targeted with, and main consumers, long acting, high-dose hormonal contraceptives like Depo Provera; which is extremely dangerous with warnings by reputable cancer watchdog groups (FDA, American Cancer Society and prominent researchers). On the other hand, white women who have lower death rates from breast cancer, and also excellent access to healthcare providers, are targeted with, and use, mainly use low-dose hormonal contraceptive pills and condoms. I learned to be more inclusive in my writing in this way. In addition, I tried something I had never done before: I built my own website. I knew I wanted this platform from the beginning, as a hub where anyone who wanted honest information could find it. My plan now is to distribute all of the resources and share my website with teachers and administrators across the state, as well as with the governor's office once they have time to focus on issues other than the pressing virus.

The last resource I created was a suggested Curriculum Guide, spanning from age 9 through high school to age 18. I hope that school administrators will consider implementing this plan in their own schools for a more comprehensive learning curriculum for their students. I believe that with all of the information I have researched and compiled, students across the state will begin receiving an "Honest Sex-Education," and that they will use this information to better protect themselves in a world where we are all growing up very quickly.